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AUTHOR Rasinski, Timothy V.
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ABSTRACT

Using the findings of two studies of the home environments of children who are successful at reading at young ages, this paper suggests ways in which early childhood classrooms can create environments that promote literacy growth and provide children with an appropriate background and interest for later successful experiences in learning to read and write. The paper suggests that: (1) teachers need to make the classroom a place where children can feel safe and are encouraged to experiment and take risks with language without fear of failure; (2) reading aloud regularly and often to children should be the centerpiece of any early childhood literacy program; (3) early childhood teachers may wish to focus on words with their students; (4) children should see their teachers and other adults use literacy; (5) early childhood classrooms should be well-equipped with reading and writing materials; and (6) teachers must expect that their children will do well in school and communicate that expectation often to children and parents. The paper concludes that early childhood literacy educators would do well to give serious consideration to the practices, environments, and attitudes of parents who give their children a good start on the road to reading and writing. (RS)

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Making Early Childhood Classrooms Conducive To Literacy Learning

Timothy V. Rasinski
Department of Teacher Development
and Curriculum Studies
Kent State University
Kent, Ohio 44242

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Despite the fact that most children enter first grade not knowing how to read in the conventional way, literacy scholars acknowledge that experiences in the years before first grade lay the foundation for later growth in reading. What children do and experience at home in the early childhood years is crucial to their literacy development.

As greater numbers of children enter into formal early childhood education programs, the responsibility for providing the appropriate experiences and ensuring an adequate background for literacy learning is increasingly placed on these programs. The question, then, must be raised, what does an appropriate early childhood literacy program look like? What kind of environment in early childhood classrooms promote preliteracy development?

One place to look for answers to these questions is in studies of home environments of children who are successful at reading at young ages. Two studies, in particular, give insight into home environments and provide direction for developing early childhood classroom environments that promote literacy. Dolores Durkin's (1966) research into children who learn to read prior to entering first grade is a landmark study in reading education. More recently, Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines (1988) studied the home environments of children from inner-city neighborhoods who were successful in learning to read.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to use the findings of these two studies to suggest ways in which early childhood classrooms can create environments that promote literacy growth and provide children with an appropriate background and interest for later successful experiences in learning to read and write.

Active Involvement

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of parents in both studies was the active involvement of parents in the lives of their children. Parents thoroughly enjoyed their children's company and found time to play and work with them.

In the Durkin study parents of early readers seemed more likely to invest time in their children's activities than parents of non-early readers. One mother of and early reader, for example, "talked about many things she and her young son had done together ..." (p. 110). Another mother "wondered whether she herself was immature because she found the company of her son so much more stimulating than the time spent with other adults "(p. 110). Moreover, the environment that the parents surrounded the activity with was low key and informal. Children were encouraged to experiment with writing and ask questions. In contrast, many of the mothers of non early readers described themselves as busy and not having time to spend with their children. Interestingly, only 30% of the parents of early readers thought that special training was required to teach reading while 70% of the parents of non-early readers felt that special training was important.

Taylor and Dorsey Gaines also describe many instances in which parents in their study became actively involved with their children. For example, Taylor and Dorsey-Gained reported that they often observed a child and a mother, who was taking college courses at the time, doing their while sitting next to each other. The mother would often write out problems for her daughter to solve.

This high level of involvement needs to be found in early childhood classrooms. Teachers of young children need to truly enjoy

the company and activity of their students. They need to make the classroom a place where children feel safe and are encouraged to experiment and take risks with language without fear of failure. There are many ways to involve oneself with young children in classroom life such as daily personal book or writing conferences, telling stories to small groups, helping individual children with their work, being a part of young children's games and activities, and encouraging youngsters to ask the teacher questions and request help when needed.

Being actively involved and enjoying the company of young children may be more of a personality trait than a set of behaviors. Nevertheless, it's important for early childhood teachers to know that literacy development may come only when the child feels secure in the company of the teacher and in the environment of the classroom and when she/he feels that the teacher likes her/him and wants to work and play with her/him.

Read Aloud

Durkin found that every child in her study who learned to read at an early age was read to at home. Parents took the time to regularly read to their children. Moreover, parents reported reading to their children even after the children had learned to read.

Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines noted, too, in their study that storybook reading seemed to be an important part of the families they observed. For example, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines describe how one parent read books to her children, "Tanya talked of reading to Queenie and of reading the same books to Gary. Tanya said that Gary would get Queenie's books for himself. She explained, 'And if there's something

there that I think he should know, then I bring that into the conversation ...'" (p. 135).

Reading aloud regularly and often to children should be the centerpiece of any early childhood literacy program. Teachers should choose books that they know children will find interesting. Having more than one story time throughout the day is appropriate as well as reading the same book more than once. Not only does read aloud increase students' interest in books and reading, it works to enlarge their vocabularies, improve knowledge of story structure, and vicariously increases students' background of experience.

Beyond reading books to children teachers should ensure that there is time after each read aloud session to talk about the story and words that were encountered in the story. The discussion should not be a time to check students' comprehension but an opportunity for all class members to talk about what they felt were the most interesting aspects of the story.

Focus on Words

Durkin found that in the read aloud sessions between parents of early readers and their children parents allowed children to see the print. Moreover, parents of early readers were twice as likely as parents of non-early readers to talk about words the children asked about and also more likely to point out words while reading. Indeed, five times as many parents of early readers than parents of non-early readers felt that their children's interest in word meanings accounted for their interest in learning to read.

Understanding what a word is, what it means, and how it works is critical to early reading development. Parents in the Durkin study discussed with their children the words from the stories they read to

their youngsters.

Early childhood teachers may also wish to focus on words with their students. Talking about the meanings of words in stories that are read aloud is very appropriate. Bringing in environmental print, such as labels from food containers and pictures of familiar business logos, and labeling recognizable objects in the classroom are ways of helping children develop a concept of word and what individual words look like and refer to.

Using enlarged texts such as found in language experience chart stories or big book stories allow teachers to focus a group of children's attention on individual words in much the same way that parents point out words to their own children during read aloud. After reading aloud a chart story or big book and talking about it with the children, teachers could ask children to identify and discuss interesting words in the story, and match those words in the text with word cards that the teacher prints on a card as the children talk about them. Later these words can be listed on a large sheet of paper and displayed on a wall so that the children can further see and talk about them.

Model Reading and Writing

If children are to learn that reading is important they should see that significant adults find reading important in their own lives. Children need to see adults reading. In Durkin's study, over 80% of the mothers interviewed who had early readers described themselves as avid readers. Only a third of the mothers of children who were not early readers described themselves in this way. Surely the early reading children saw that reading was important to their mothers. In

the Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines' study families' of successful readers used reading and writing often and in a wide variety of ways from reading newspapers and magazines to reading instructions, affidavits, calendars and other materials to meet the practical demands of life.

In early childhood classrooms children should see their teachers and other adults use literacy. Certainly in read aloud children view their teachers reading. But also, by reading during sustained silent reading periods, sharing important notes and bits of information with the class, keeping and sharing a daily journal and the like, teachers demonstrate to students first hand that reading is something that is important in their lives. Teachers also need to talk with their students about how they use reading and writing daily in their lives and ask children to observe the many ways their parents and others use literacy daily.

Materials for Reading and Writing

Both Durkin and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines found that in the homes of the successful readers they studied the literacy materials were plentiful and seemed to play an important role in the literacy development of the children. Nearly three fourths of Durkin's parents of early readers felt that the availability of reading and writing materials helped to interest their children in learning to read. Less than a quarter of the parents of non-early readers responded similarly. Parents in the Durkin study reported that the children had easy access to library books, alphabet books, as well as coloring books.

Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines found that availability of reading materials was also a salient part of the families they studied. In one observation a parent related that he had purchased a book bag for

his daughter. She filled it with so many books that the father didn't think she could even lift it. On many occasions the researchers found the children reading or writing at home with materials that were at hand.

Early childhood classrooms should be well equipped with reading and writing materials. Without doubt, a well-stocked classroom library from which students can choose books should be the centerpiece of the classroom. Accompanying the library should be a comfortable and attractive area at which children can read by themselves or with others. Area rugs, pillows, bean bag chairs and the like help make such an area special to the children. A writing center equipped with various sizes and types of paper, markers, pens and pencils, rulers, scissors, and other writing aids is also a key element to the early childhood classroom. Magazines and coloring books, which children can browse through, mark up, or cut out should also be available. Teachers should ensure that all children spend time in these centers and that they have easy access to these areas at other times.

High Expectations

In nearly all the homes that Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines studied, despite the poverty and hopelessness that surrounded them, the parents held high hopes and expectations for their children. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines describe one instance in which a parent spoke about her expectations for her children, "She talked about her life and the difficulties that she had overcome, and at times she seemed invincible as she spoke with fierce determination of her hopes for her children. She told us, 'If it takes all I have I'm going to help them get out of this situation'" (p. 49).

In another instance a mother explained one of her reasons for attending college. "...Tanya wanted her own children to get degrees. 'I'm not goin' to have them saying that they don't want to go to college because I didn't,' she said. Tanya went on to say that she wanted to go herself for them" (p. 12).

Similarly, early childhood teachers need to expect their children to be successful. In spite of whatever obstacles may be in the children's way, teachers must expect that the children will do well in school and communicate that expectation often to children and parents. Children try to live up to the expectations that important people in their lives have for them. And, when they realize that their teacher truly believes that they can do well in school and learn to read and write, then they will be more likely to set such an expectation as a goal for their own lives.

Conclusion

Whole language practices and theories often have their origin from observations of what happens in the homes of young language learners. Whole language advocates suggest that how children learn oral language at home should help inform the way written language is addressed in schools.

This paper extends that line of thought by suggesting that what parents do to help their young children become readers and writers should help inform how teachers of young children introduce literacy at school to their students. Certainly, not everything that teachers should do will be found in these home, but several important principles of instruction that should guide teachers can be identified in these homes. Early childhood literacy educators would do well to give serious consideration to the practices, environments, and

attitudes of parents who give their children a good start on the road to reading and writing.

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